

## The Sacred Wife of Kamehameha I

### Keopuolani

Marjorie Sinclair

Keopuolani was the sacred wife of Kamehameha I. She was born with divine rank—both her mother and father were *ni'aupio* chiefs.<sup>1</sup> This alone gave her a special power which no other woman could have had in the reigns of Kamehameha I and II. She possessed also a quiet courage and toughness together with determined wisdom: she took a lead in breaking the *kapu*—even to the extent of prompting warfare to assure the safety of her son's reign; she saw the implications in Hawaii's early contact with western culture; she foresaw that the westerner in his less dramatic and practical skills—his gunnery and carpentry were already valued—was bringing a new kind of power in reading and writing; and she embraced Christianity. The sacred wife of Kamehameha has been overshadowed in history by the beauty, the imperiousness and the authority of Kamehameha's favorite queen, Kaahumanu—the woman who would become *kuhina-nui*, or premier, and thus share the throne during Liholiho's reign and the early of Kauikeaouli's. Both kings were the sons of Keopuolani. Kaahumanu had political power and eminence. Keopuolani, no less eminent in her own way, exercised a power derived from Hawaiian myth and her hereditary "divinity." Some historians in focussing on the political Kaahumanu have overlooked Keopuolani's strength, which came from the determination and the flexibility of her nature.

#### I

Keopuolani was born in 1778 (Kamakau says 1780) on the island of Maui.<sup>2</sup> In the same year Captain Cook saw his first Hawaiian island. Thereafter increasing number of Europeans and Americans were voyaging into Pacific waters. Their ideas and skills quickly influenced an ancient

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culture already in the process of change and set the small island kingdom on its confusing and often turbulent path toward the acceptance of 19th century western culture. Keopuolani was born thus on the threshold of the new; but she belonged to the world of old Hawaii, with its rituals and its genealogical chants tracing her ancestry back to the first man and woman—back to the gods themselves.<sup>3</sup>

The infant Keopuolani was placed under the guardianship of her grandmother, Kalola, and as with all young chiefs, she was set up in her own household with her own retinue. What complicates the genealogy of Keopuolani is that she acquired her divinity from the ancient Hawaiian tradition of the marriages of brother and sister of royal blood. Thus her guardian, Kalola, who was a chiefess of sacred rank, was mother of both Keopuolani's mother and father—but they were actually half brother and sister, since they were children of different fathers. As the issue of half-sister and brother, a union which intensified the sacred blood, Keopuolani possessed impressive rank. The kapus which surrounded the girl were formidable: if a man inadvertently stepped on her shadow or came into contact with her possessions or her person, he would be killed. To avoid such violence, it had become customary for the chiefess to go out only at night.

Keopuolani's childhood was spent on the edge of war and often in flight from its bloodshed and danger. Her father Kiwalao, her uncle Kahekili, her cousin Kalanikupule, and her uncle and future husband Kamehameha were battling for supremacy. When she was about four, her father was killed in the battle of Mokuohai between the forces of Kiwalao and Kamehameha. After this, her uncle Kahekili and cousin Kalanikupule waged almost continual war on the islands of Maui and Oahu in an attempt to hold or to enlarge the range of their power. Keopuolani probably spent most of these years on Maui. The Hawaiian historian Kamakau records that she was brought up in Wailuku, Olowalu, and Hamakua.<sup>4</sup> She must have spent some time on Oahu. Fornander, the Swedish historian who lived in the islands and married a Hawaiian woman, chronicles an incident when the little girl was taken—together with her grandmother, mother and aunt—from Oahu to Maui by her cousin Kalanikupule.<sup>5</sup> She may have been a witness to the bloody massacre at Olowalu on Maui (where Kalola and her family resided in 1790) when Captain Metcalf, an American trader and ship captain, ruthlessly fired on the produce-laden canoes of Hawaiians approaching his ship, because his ship's boat had been stolen and one of his seamen killed. David Malo writes of the aftermath of this act of revenge that "the bodies of the slain were dragged for with fishhooks and collected in a heap on the beach, where their brains flowed out of their skulls."<sup>6</sup>

The climax of the warfare which shaped a large part of Keopuolani's childhood was the battle which determined her destiny. Kamehameha in 1790 decided to extend his power to the island of Maui, then under the control of Kalanikupule. With a great fleet of war canoes he landed at Hana and fought successfully along the eastern and northern coast of Maui until he came to Wailuku. He forced the defending army into the narrow enclosure of Iao Valley. The Maui warriors tried to claw their way up the cliffs, but were massacred. Kamehameha had won another victory.<sup>7</sup>

Preparations had been made for Keopuolani, her mother and aunt to escape across the mountains and join Kalola at Olowalu. From Olowalu the royal chiefesses would embark for Molokai. The flight was a difficult one. The West Maui mountains are precipitous, a series of peaks, often razor-edged, which are almost continually wrapped in mists or rain. The valleys are deep and heavily shadowed. The terrain is overgrown with coarse grasses and shrubs, with trees near the summits. Kamakau gives us a brief glimpse of the flight. "The fugitives fled across the sharp ridges of the mountains, the mother carrying the child on her back and the *kahu* carrying mother and child, until they were able to escape to Molokai."<sup>8</sup>

On the island of Molokai Keopuolani's grandmother became ill, and the refugees could not carry out their original intention of going to Oahu to join Kahekili. Kamehameha sought "to come to some terms with Kalola, and, if possible, get her daughters and granddaughter in his possession."<sup>9</sup> He sent a messenger to the distinguished chiefess to request that he might take her to Hawaii, where he would arrange for her and her family to live according to their rank.<sup>10</sup> The king then embarked in his war canoes with a great company of chiefs and sailed to Kaunakakai on Molokai. There he learned that the noble old woman was ill, perhaps dying, at her refuge at Kalamaula. He joined the encampment of chiefs who were gathering because of Kalola's illness. During one of Kalola's last days Kamehameha talked with her; she had been close to him when he was a boy—she and her husband Kalaniopuu had adopted him. The young Kamehameha had grown up as a brother to Kiwalao.<sup>11</sup> The connection had other ties: she had been married for a time to Kamehameha's father and had borne to him the mother of Keopuolani.<sup>12</sup> Kamakau records that Kamehameha during his conversation with the ailing Kalola asked: "Since you are so ill and perhaps about to die, will you permit me to take my royal daughter and my sisters to Hawaii to rule as chiefs?" [In using such terms Kamehameha referred to the closeness of the relationship.] Kalola answered him. "If I die, the girl and the sisters are yours."<sup>13</sup>

The *kahuna* pronounced Kalola's illness fatal, and the people began to wail and chant dirges. At the moment of her death, the lamentation

became an orgy of grief. Chiefs mutilated themselves by cutting or tatooing their skin; Kamehameha mourned by knocking out some of his teeth. Finally, certain men were killed to be Kalola's companions in death. "The chiefs and commoners acted like madmen," Kamakau wrote.<sup>14</sup>

After the burial of Kalola's bones, Keopuolani, her mother and aunt sailed with Kamehameha to the island of Hawaii. At the time he took Keopuolani to his favorite residence in Kona, he must have planned marriage with her; her children—who would inherit her rank—would secure for him the succession of the throne. The girl was "a seal of reconciliation between himself and the older branch of the Keawe dynasty, the representatives of Kiwalao."<sup>15</sup> In addition she brought to Kamehameha the power of her kapu and genealogy, and she brought a goddess—an *akua moo*, a water god. The name of the goddess was Kihawahine. Several generations earlier she had been an ancestress of Keopuolani, a chiefess who legend said had been transformed into a water spirit, and the Maui chiefs of that period had deified her and given her the kapus and kapu-sticks of a god; consequently all people had to prostrate themselves before her image. Kihawahine was a god who helped Kamehameha unite his kingdom from Hawaii to Kauai; on his tours of state or his battles he carried Keopuolani's goddess with him.<sup>16</sup>

The records of the next five years give only occasional glimpses of Keopuolani. She apparently was established in residence at Keauhou in Kona.<sup>17</sup> Captain George Vancouver in 1794 tells an incident which probably alludes to the kapu chiefess, and which indicates that Kamehameha provided a life suitable to her rank. The eminent voyager describes a chant and hula performed at Kealakekua Bay for a "captive princess." When her name was spoken all people present removed their clothes or ornaments above the waist to honor her. The name of the princess in Vancouver's strange rendering of Hawaiian words seems to be that of Keopuolani.<sup>18</sup>

When in 1795 Kamehameha sailed on an expedition to conquer Oahu, he took along Keopuolani and her mother. Some time during that year he married the young kapu chiefess at Waikiki. She was about seventeen when she became his sacred wife. She was never a favorite. She did not possess the beauty or the alluring capriciousness of Kaahumanu. Furthermore, her rank was so high that when Kamehameha came into her presence he had to remove his *malo* and prostrate himself. But he wanted "children of divine rank who carried the sacred fire (*ahi*) tabu." After the children were born it was his practice to lie on the ground and let them sit and play on his chest—one of the ways in which he recognized that their kapus were sacred and superior to his.<sup>19</sup>



The turbulence of Keopuolani's early years helped form her strong character. It had two aspects: she could be wilful, and she knew how to exercise power. But she also had an inherent concern and tenderness for people. These qualities emerged especially after she began to observe the behavior of the missionaries and to accept Christianity. They had appeared earlier; William Richards states that the queen was known to have sheltered people who had broken kapus and come to her for safety.<sup>20</sup>

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By the king Keopuolani had a great number of children, probably eleven or twelve—this in spite of the frequent suggestions that she was not in sturdy health. Three survived: Liholiho, born in 1797; Kauikeaouli, in 1814; and Nahienaena, in 1815. As was customary among high chiefesses, Keopuolani had other husbands than the king—Kalanimoku for a while, and Hoapili, who remained her husband after Kamehameha's death. We have little information about her life after her marriage until the last illness and death of Kamehameha I. As sacred wife she went with him whenever he moved from place to place— island to island—in the way of Hawaiian kings and queens, who traditionally did not have a single residence. She spent her days and months on Hawaii, Oahu, Maui, and occasionally on Kauai.

The stories of Keopuolani's poor health began at the time of her birth. When she was an infant, her kapus were such that none dared approach her but her wet-nurse. This nurse had a healthy daughter named Kanekoa, and the chiefess's attendants wished to exchange the healthy child for the "homely and puny" one. However, a dog intervened, according to the account recorded by Kamakau. The animal entered the place where the two infants were sleeping and bit off the fingers of one of Kanekoa's hands. "The servant might have been the chiefess had not God willed it otherwise."<sup>21</sup> This little story has a legendary tone. Keopuolani's life—as the life of any sacred chiefess—was pervaded by the mythic quality with which ritual and custom surrounded it. She was like a goddess.

Because of this, her illnesses were attended not only by the medical *kahunas* but by ceremonies in the *heiau*—this especially after she became Kamehameha's wife. In about 1803 or 1804 she fell seriously ill. The king was at Diamond Head living in the *heiau* because of an epidemic; the disease was called *oku'u*, perhaps cholera. A message came to him that Keopuolani had fainted and seemed about to die. A sacrifice was demanded. Three men caught eating coconuts with the chiefesses—it was forbidden for men to eat with women and for women to eat coconuts—were seized by the priests. They had broken a powerful kapu and were con-

demned to die. "The skins of the men were scorched like those of the sacrificial pigs and laid together in a special place before the *kahunas*, the king, and all the others who had assembled there to worship the god idol. . . ." The sacrifice served a double purpose. The men were killed not only for Keopuolani but also as an offering to restore the national health.<sup>22</sup>

In 1806 Keopuolani was taken ill at Waikiki. Kamehameha was notified and a priest was consulted; he claimed the sickness was caused by commoners eating the kapu coconuts. The gods from whom Keopuolani was descended were offended by this act, he said. She would not recover unless the men were sacrificed. Kamehameha ordered ten men seized. Only three were killed, however, because Keopuolani's health began to improve. The others were set free. These two incidents resemble one another sufficiently to suggest the possibility that they are different versions of the same.<sup>23</sup>

The circumstances of the births of Keopuolani's three surviving children are documented to a degree or are surrounded by historical anecdote. The material suggests that the queen was not reconciled to the Hawaiian custom of giving royal children to the guardianship of other high-ranking chiefs. When Liholiho was born at Hilo in November, 1797, he was immediately taken from his mother and given to the guardianship of Kaahumanu. Keopuolani must have been frequently near the child, however, for Kamehameha proclaimed him the heir.<sup>24</sup> The second surviving son, Kauikeaouli, was born at Keauhou in Kona on March 17, 1814. By this time Keopuolani had begun to assert her will. The chiefs gathered for royal births as well as for royal deaths. Many chiefs wanted the privilege of rearing the royal child. She refused. Then Kuakini, a distinguished chief and her own *kahu* or honored attendant, asked for the child. She yielded to his request and urged him to remain with her during the birth so that the baby would not get into the possession of anyone else; Kuakini stayed at Keauhou with the sacred chiefess. On the morning of the birth, the infant appeared to be dead, and Kuakini did not wish to take him. Another chief had brought his prophet with him. The prophet claimed the child would live. The infant was cleaned and laid upon a consecrated place. The seer fanned him and sprinkled him with water. He addressed a prayer to a child of god: "The heavens lighten with the God/The earth burns with the child." The baby began to stir; then he made sounds. The chief, Kaikioewa, was proclaimed the guardian of the infant, and he took Kauikeaouli away to "rear him in an out-of-the-way place." Finally, when Nahienaena—the cherished daughter—was born in 1815, Keopuolani refused to give up the baby. She announced that she would keep this, the last of her children, by her side. And she did.<sup>25</sup>

In the spring of 1819, Kamehameha died at Kailua, Kona, his favorite residence. Almost from the moment of the great king's death until her own death five years later, Keopuolani, as the queen mother and chiefess of highest rank in the kingdom, asserted her tempered but persistent influence. The death, with its rituals, its creation of political unrest and realignment, its unlocking of forces Kamehameha had had firmly under control, marked a dramatic change in the lives of Keopuolani and her three children. Liholiho became king with Kaahumanu as *kuhina-nui*, premier; Kauikeaouli became heir-apparent, and the chiefs were already talking of a marriage between him and Nahienaena. The issue of such a brother-sister union would consolidate the dynasty of the Kamehamehas.

The king had left a major problem unsettled, one that had become increasingly burdensome to his people: the system of kapus. He had often manipulated them to his own advantage and power; he had recognized too that this ancient order was already weakened. Dibble records that on one occasion during Kamehameha's last illness he was said to have talked to his chiefs in the following manner: "If I shall recover from this sickness the charge of tabu shall devolve upon Liholiho, my son and successor, and he shall uphold the system, but the rest of us will live unrestrained."<sup>26</sup>

The kapus were the laws; they were the means of controlling and assuring supplies of fish and other produce, the manner of regulating the behavior of the different classes of people; and they were the source of power of the chiefs. For some decades they had been eroding. Westerners ate forbidden foods or dined with women—and no god struck them dead. When they introduced hard liquor, the Hawaiians themselves broke kapus in drunkenness. The chiefs felt increasingly the restrictive burden of the prohibitions which simultaneously gave them power and limited their actions. Among the women, and particularly the chiefesses, the complex pattern of restraints kept them from moving about with freedom; they could not eat certain foods; they had to be separate from the men—including the male children—when they dined. Keopuolani with her formidable and divine kapu, symbolizing the ancient, mythic power of the chiefs, seems to have increasingly regarded the prohibitions as a mixed blessing; and Kaahumanu, who possessed the power of her joint rule with Liholiho, also felt the restraints to be no longer consistent with the glimpses Hawaiians were having of life in other countries. Some said that Keopuolani and Kaahumanu, who each in her own way represented the ruling power of the Hawaiian kingdom on Kamehameha's death, had secretly planned to overthrow the system.<sup>27</sup> They acted rapidly and overtly once the king was gone.

Kamehameha's death occurred on May 8. The question of the kapu arose at once. The great chiefs, among them Keopuolani, gathered around his body, discussed the possibility of relinquishing the old funeral rites. Kaahumanu felt, however, that the moment for change had not yet come.<sup>28</sup> So the ancient rituals were carried out. Liholiho was purified from the pollution of death and sent to Kawaihae until his father was buried; ceremonies were conducted in the temples; the royal bones were stripped of flesh and prepared for entombment. Keopuolani and Hoapili sailed in a canoe one morning and carried the bones to their secret cave.<sup>29</sup>

On the day after Kamehameha's death, however, Keopuolani took the first decisive step. She ate coconuts forbidden to women and dined with the men. To them she made a forceful statement: "He who guarded the god is dead, and it is right that we should eat together freely."<sup>30</sup> She might have been echoing the earlier comment of the dead king that "the rest of us will live unrestrained."

The next move occurred at the installation of Liholiho as monarch. This time Kaahumanu made the gesture. She proclaimed: "Here are the chiefs, here are the people of your ancestors; here are your guns; here are your lands. But we two shall share rule over the land." Then she suggested to the young king that he abolish the restraints of the kapu system. Liholiho received this in silence.<sup>31</sup>

At the same ceremony, Keopuolani put her hand to her mouth as a symbol of free eating. Kamakau comments that this was an amazing thing for her to do, "one for whom the tabus were made and who had the benefit of them."<sup>32</sup> Liholiho seems to have remained silent after this overture. At the feast following the coronation, Keopuolani pursued her course. She sent a messenger to Liholiho at the men's hall to summon her younger son to eat with her. The king asked the messenger who wanted the boy. He was told that it was the queen, his mother Keopuolani. The king then said: Kamehameha our father commanded us to observe the tabu even to the last extremity of distress and poverty; but now since the *mother* of this child has sent for him to violate the tabu, I will go myself and witness the act and see if any harm shall follow." Liholiho escorted his young brother to the women's hall and stood in the doorway to watch the symbolic act. He did not himself at this time break the kapu.<sup>33</sup>

Liholiho was hesitating; and his hesitation was understandable. He was a new king, and he shared his power; and while he was well aware that the kapus were being broken daily throughout Kailua—he himself had broken them while drunk—he had been sufficiently trained for his job by his father to be aware that a rupture with the past could have serious consequences. Kamehameha had used the kapus to rule with great power, cunning and flexibility. Liholiho also knew that ranks of opposition

to the continuing acts of law-breaking and sacrilege were formed under the leadership of his cousin, Kekuaokalani. Kamehameha had entrusted this cousin with the guardianship of his war god; and Kekuaokalani was both outraged and hostile to anything which would lead to the weakening of the god's power. It would in effect deprive him of his inheritance—an inheritance which historically had been as important as the governance of the lands. In the first week of Liholiho's reign, Kekuaokalani made his views known. When Kaahumanu summoned the new king back to Kailua for his coronation, the guardian of the war god tried to detain him. "Your father left commands to two of us, the care of the government to you, of the god to me. . . . Tell the messenger we two will not return for we have heard there is free eating at Kailua." We may surmise that Liholiho greeted this also with silence. We know that he returned for the coronation and then went back to Kawaihae; there he found Kekuaokalani at prayer and joined him.<sup>34</sup> He thus seems to have tried to temporize and to please both factions. The keeper of the war god always made it clear he expected the new king to adhere to the ancient code of his ancestors.

Nearly six months passed without resolution of the conflict. Liholiho continued to drink heavily. Dibble records he tried on two occasions to consecrate temples while he was intoxicated. Late in 1819 Kaahumanu renewed her pressure; she sent a special messenger to the king. The message he brought, as recorded by Kamakau was: "Your *kahu* has sent me to say that the *ti* leaf tabu is to be declared to your god upon your arrival in Kailua." The *ti* leaf kapu was a form of appeal to the gods to withdraw their interdictions; a kind of offering. In effect it could lead to abrogation of the kapus. Liholiho, hearing the message, bowed his head as though in reflection, and historians agree he made a gesture which was taken to be assent. It was still not comfortable for him. Instead of making the brief journey to Kailua for the momentous act he took to his sailing canoe with a group of favorites, and spent two days at sea eating and drinking. When the wind died down, the resolute Kaahumanu sent a double canoe to tow the king's boat ashore.

A banquet of forbidden foods had been prepared while the king had been sailing the Kona waters. On landing, Liholiho proceeded to the place where the chiefesses were ready to dine. Abruptly, as if on impulse, he seated himself. A great shout arose, *ai noa*, free eating! Before the banquet was over, the king ordered messengers to all the islands to command the destruction of idols and the overthrow of the kapus. Whatever his hesitations, he had finally acted; and in recognizing the decay of the kapu, he broke with Kekuaokalani.<sup>35</sup>

Kekuaokalani summoned his adherents, including a high priest, and withdrew to Kaawaloa, several miles south of Kailua. The chiefs at Kailua,

discerning the seriousness of the move, gathered in council. They agreed to send an embassy to the keeper of the war god to persuade him to come to Kailua for friendly negotiations. In this way, open conflict might be averted. Hoapili and Naihe, the national orator, were selected. On the morning the chiefs were ready to sail, Keopuolani appeared on the beach. Seating herself in the official canoe, she announced that she would accompany the ambassadors. She acted almost as if she could trust no one; or perhaps as if it were her duty as divine leader to make sure all would be well for her son Liholiho. He appears to have remained passive.

The envoys and the queen mother reached Kaawaloa in the evening; there they established themselves at Naihe's house at the foot of the cliffs of Kealakekua Bay. The men went immediately to call on Kekuaokalani and in due course reported back to Keopuolani that the dissident chief was willing to go to Kailua. He announced, however, that he had first to discuss the matter with his wife; and he stipulated that no matter what was decided he had no intention of violating the eating kapu. Keopuolani listened carefully. She said: "He is an *uku* fish. He should be pulled in as soon as he is hooked. He has consented to go to Kailua but he has refused to practice free eating, and he is going to talk with Manono [his wife] and then go with us tomorrow. I'm not so sure of it. Perhaps yes, and perhaps no." These words suggest Keopuolani's reason for accompanying the mission. She had been instrumental in the discarding of the kapu. And she was giving her son the fullest possible support in this crisis of authority and belief.

The next morning Kekuaokalani and his followers came to Naihe's house to meet with the queen; he and his men were formed in lines; they carried torches. The gesture was clear: as Keopuolani had hinted, there would be no compromise. This was the signal for war. Hoapili once again asked Kekuaokalani to accompany the embassy to Kailua by canoe. The guardian of the war god now refused. "I go by land with my men; they are without food and can supply themselves by land." Hoapili responded that Kekuaokalani thought too much about his men—that the mission had simply invited him alone to Kailua. Kekuaokalani reiterated. "I will not go by canoe. I go by land with the rest." Keopuolani then spoke: "So you cut the navel cord, my brother, by this act."

Apparently some kind of ruse had been planned. When Keopuolani reached Kailua, she claimed that she was to have been killed. Kamakau says it was she who ordered Kalanimoku to prepare the king's army for war. "Friendly means have failed," she said; "it is for you to act now." At this moment Keopuolani stepped beyond divinity into a political role designed to make certain that Liholiho would be undisputed king of the Hawaiian nation.

The prime minister ordered arms for the warriors and distribution of feather capes and helmets. The decisive battle was fought on the rugged lava slopes at Kuamoo. Kekuaokalani and Manono, his wife, were killed, and his forces were routed. Their defeat was in effect a defeat of the gods. The chiefs and people recognized this. "The army with idols was weak, the army without idols was strong and victorious. There is no power in the gods. They are a vanity and a lie."<sup>36</sup>

Thus was settled what in other circumstances—as we know from the history of religious wars in other parts of the world—might have been a prolonged struggle between reformers and traditionalists. A religious vacuum was in process of creation: and to the missionaries and others it seemed as if divine providence had acted. Kekuaokalani died in November, 1819. The brig *Thaddeus*, bearing the first company of American missionaries, had sailed from Boston in October, 1819. It anchored at Kailua on April 4, 1820.

#### 4

The records concerning Keopuolani from 1820 to late in 1822 once again become fragmentary. Hiram Bingham, a distinguished member of the first company of missionaries, wrote that on April 4, 1820 as the *Thaddeus* came to anchor, he saw a great many people enjoying swimming and surfing—"From the highest to the lowest rank, including the king and his mother."<sup>37</sup> William Richards, a member of the second company of missionaries and destined to be Keopuolani's devoted mentor and friend, recorded in his Memoir of the queen that when the first company consulted the chiefs as to whether or not they could remain in Hawaii to teach their religion and skills, "Keopuolani without hesitation approved their proposals."<sup>38</sup> He pointed out, however, that the chiefess herself did not take instruction in Christianity until 1822.

Early in 1821 Liholiho moved his court and capitol from Kailua, Kona to Honolulu. Keopuolani and her husband, Hoapili, and the royal children Kauikeaouli and Nahienaena went with the company of chiefs to the new center of government. One of the first acts of the king was to make a royal progress around the island of Oahu. He took with him his mother, Kaahumanu and his five wives and favorites on this tour to greet his people and to feast—especially on the fat mullets of Waialua. Some travelled by canoe and others by horse. After this trip Liholiho—always a restless man—proposed a voyage to Kauai. Kauai was the one island not conquered by his father, and the chiefs were concerned. They proposed that he take a large group of chiefs and warriors with him. "But Keopuolani said, 'Do not be afraid and do not take men with you, for you will find men on Kauai.'"<sup>39</sup>



The king apparently listened to his mother—or to his own impulse—and on July 21 without any special preparation or notice embarked suddenly for Kauai in an open boat. There were about thirty persons aboard on this dangerous and almost disastrous passage—several times the over-laden vessel was nearly swamped. Liholiho's arrival on Kauai was announced by the ringing of bells and firing of guns. His presence there effected the final consolidation of the kingdom. Kaumualii, king of Kauai, treated him as sovereign. He offered not only hospitality appropriate to a royal visitor but also his guns, his vessels, indeed his island. Liholiho was now ruling chief of Kauai—the king of the entire Hawaiian archipelago. A political maneuver which might have turned into a bloody encounter was accomplished in peace. A few days after the king's passage, Keopuolani and Hoapili went to Kauai "to obtain timber for their ship Hooikaika."<sup>40</sup> From these tiny fragments we can speculate that the queen mother during 1821 continued active in her son's court and traveled with him during his restless journeys.

By 1822, Keopuolani had begun to accept many western ways. She wore western clothes, she introduced western furniture into her house,<sup>41</sup> and she took instruction in Christianity.<sup>42</sup> She watched the manners of the missionary women. She also paid close attention to the western education of her two younger children. Nahienaena and Kauikeaouli had learned to read and write within about two years after the 1820 arrival of the missionaries. The chiefess worried, however, about the effect of certain western customs on Liholiho. He continued to drink heavily. Bingham wrote of an incident at Waikiki when the king lay seriously ill from the effect of liquor. His skin was red, his muscles rigid; he suffered from convulsions, and blood flowed from his mouth. His guards had been assembled; and close to his mat sat Keopuolani, Kaahumanu, his wives and friends. They all wept. The people had assumed he was dying.<sup>43</sup>

Keopuolani soon recognized that there were different types of foreigners. One kind led Liholiho into drunkenness and debauchery. But the other revealed selflessness, and eagerness to instruct, and a restraint which characterized most of the American missionaries. She expressed a desire that Nahienaena and Kauikeaouli "might be well educated, and particularly that Nahienaena might be trained up in the habit of Christian and civilized females, like the wives of the missionaries."<sup>44</sup>

Early in 1823 Keopuolani's health began to fail, and she decided to move her household from the pressures of the court circle in Honolulu to the tranquility of Waikiki. With her she took Hoapili and Nahienaena. There, in the grove of coconut trees—long a favored holiday spot for the chiefs—she established herself in temporary lanais of coconut fronds and



grasses. Each Sunday the missionaries walked across the hot plain from Honolulu to Waikiki to hold divine service and to instruct the queen mother in Christian doctrine. Keopuolani decided, however, that these Sunday meetings did not suffice; she asked that a religious instructor be attached to her household. Her choice was Taua, a Tahitian who had come to Honolulu with the English missionary, William Ellis. The mission approved, and Taua remained in Keopuolani's household until her death.<sup>45</sup>

Taua's presence, however, created certain difficulties. As was customary and as her rank required, the queen mother was surrounded by a large group of chiefs. Some were ready to accept western and Christian ways; a certain number remained traditional and suspicious of foreign influence. When they saw their queen mother under the sway of the "long necks" they were alarmed. Though the kapus had been abrogated in 1819, not all Hawaiians could summarily rid themselves of the old ways of thought and old beliefs. Richards chronicled a morning when Keopuolani, feeling weaker than usual, chose to remain on her mat to rest. She asked that her attendants and the chiefs leave her so that she might have an hour alone for prayer. The chiefs were astonished and laughed at such a request. She was a *kapu alii*; as such she was constantly waited upon and attended. The queen reprimanded them sternly and spoke of their clinging to the "dark hearts" of former times. She commanded them to leave her in solitude. They complied.<sup>46</sup>

In April, 1823 the second company of missionaries arrived on the *Thames*—among them Charles Stewart and William Richards, who would teach Keopuolani, learn to love her, and who would comfort her in the last hours of her life. She came to regard them affectionately as her "sons" and cared for them as a chiefess cares for her own. The day of the arrival was a Sunday, and when the news reached the chiefs at Waikiki, they sent for the new missionaries to hold divine service. The new arrivals took the long, hot walk across the plain to the shady coconut grove. Charles Stewart recorded the presence of the queen and listed her first among the important chiefs, but did not picture her. He also named Kauikeaouli, Nahienaena and Kaahumanu. Stewart saw a lanai of coconut fronds under which many thicknesses of mats had been spread. The chiefs took their ease in a variety of positions: some cross-legged, some lounging, others lying down. Each was surrounded by attendants, one fanning his master or mistress, another whisking away flies with a small feather *kahili*, the rest waiting to serve. All the chiefs were dressed in European style; all had spelling books and slates. They greeted the new arrivals and wrote their names on their slates. In return they asked for the missionaries' names and how to spell them correctly.<sup>47</sup> William Richards

commented in his Memoir that those who met Keopuolani on that day "will never forget the mild and beautiful expression of her countenance, when she raised her head a little from her pillow to bid them a joyful welcome to the islands."<sup>48</sup>

5

In May Keopuolani decided to make her last move—this time back to the island of her birth, Maui. She chose Lahaina, with its warm and sunny climate—another place traditionally a favorite with the chiefs. Lahaina at that time was verdant with groves of breadfruit trees, coconuts, *kou*, bananas. There were many water fields of taro and fish ponds to reflect the luxuriance of the vegetation. A large surf rolled onto the long sandy beach. Behind the village the mountains rose in a series of smooth green slopes reaching back into the precipitous valleys and up to the higher peaks.

Before her departure, Keopuolani requested the Americans to assign teachers to go with her. She wanted a mission established in Lahaina, and for herself further instruction in reading and writing; she also wished to have a man of God to pray with her. The Honolulu mission elected Charles Stewart and William Richards to accompany the queen.

The king sent his mother to Maui on *Cleopatra's Barge*, his most elegant vessel. On the day of her departure from Honolulu, Liholiho escorted Keopuolani to the beach where hundreds had gathered to say farewell to the sacred chiefess. Already on board the ship were Hoapili, Nahienaena and Kalanimoku, the prime minister, who was the official escort of the queen mother to her new home; also settled in cabins were Stewart and Richards and their families. The king helped his mother into the ship's long boat, then followed her. When they reached the anchored *Cleopatra*, he guided her up the ladder to the couch arranged under an awning. "The king continued to manifest the utmost affection and respect for her until we got under way; and, apparently from the same filial feelings, accompanied us fifteen miles out to sea."<sup>49</sup>

The dawn after the arrival in Lahaina, Keopuolani sent a messenger to the missionaries announcing that she, the princess, and the other chiefs were ready for morning worship. Stewart and Richards hurried to the *kou* grove at the beach where the queen's temporary lanai had been erected and found 350 solemn and attentive people waiting. Under a blue sky and near the pounding sea, Taua opened the services by reading from the scriptures in Tahitian; the clergy then conducted the usual Sunday prayer service. Afterwards, Keopuolani requested the missionaries to come not only on Sunday but also each day at sunrise and at sunset to conduct prayers for herself and the princess.<sup>50</sup>

Schools were established in the households of the chiefs on the very next day. Keopuolani and Nahienaena convened them in their separate residences. The queen mother was herself a diligent pupil; she feared that she did not have long to live; she wanted to learn enough of the word of God to know her way to heaven.<sup>51</sup> By the end of the first week, Stewart was able to say that Hawaiians might be seen morning, noon, and night "in groups from ten to thirty persons, spelling and reading and writing . . . whether in their houses or in the grove, whether strolling on the beach, or I might almost add sporting in the surf."<sup>52</sup>

A fortnight after Keopuolani's arrival on Maui, the missionaries were summoned early one morning to the beach. There they found not only Keopuolani and Nahienaena but a group of workers standing at a respectful distance near a pile of lumber. After the greetings were over, the royal chiefesses escorted the two men to a site earlier pointed out as desirable for mission buildings. Richards and Stewart signified their approval, and the workers immediately began to place the corner posts of two grass houses. Stewart writes: "Our kind patroness remained on the ground till we ourselves left it for breakfast; and constantly addressed us and spoke of us to the people by the affectionate appellation of 'sons.'"<sup>53</sup>

Keopuolani's life in Lahaina was not all mission-centered. The air was sweet with the fragrances of sea and foliage, echoing with the sound of surf and wind. Each morning the kapu chiefesses received fresh leis of flowers and *maile* to wind around their heads and deck their shoulders. Often a troop of dancers and musicians performed for them, singing the old mele, acting out in dance the legends of the past or the glory of the chiefs.

One afternoon late in June as Charles Stewart was returning from a visit aboard the *Boston*, anchored in Lahaina Roads, he noticed a large group of Hawaiians gathered near Keopuolani's residence and other people hurrying from all directions. He went in curiosity and watched a performance of the hula. The dancers were two girls of about ten. Their costumes of yellow kapa had been arranged in thick folds hanging from waist to knee. On their heads and around their necks they wore leis of entwined greenery and flowers. On their wrists hung bracelets of ivory and around their ankles circlets of dogs' teeth. The dogs' teeth—fastened to a mesh of hemp—rattled rhythmically as the girls danced. The six male musicians sat before large calabashes on which they beat with short sticks; simultaneously they chanted the words of the *mele*. The girls danced slowly and gracefully and were "free from indelicacy of action." The song celebrated the queen and the princess; it compared them "to everything sublime in nature," and exalted them as gods. So intent were the Hawaiians on the spectacle of the dance that the missionaries began to

wonder how they would get attention for the service of evening prayer. Keopuolani, however, ordered the performance to close at the moment of sunset. She commanded the people to be seated and remain silent. Evening prayer was then held for a congregation of 2,000 people.<sup>54</sup> William Ellis records a similar dance program a week or two later which also ended in prayer.<sup>55</sup>

Thus the ailing Keopuolani, together with her small daughter, lived in a pattern which cultivated western ways, but did not wholly relinquish Hawaiian traditions. Their routine could be interrupted by royal visits. One evening during a prayer service, a salute of five guns suddenly heralded the approach of Liholiho.

When the prayers were over, Richards and Stewart escorted Nahienaena and one of Liholiho's young wives to the beach. Keopuolani, however, remained in the *kou* grove; and the chiefs gathered in their customary ceremonial circle. When Liholiho reached the circle, he entered it at the edge opposite Keopuolani. Seated at that place was the mother of his young wife. He dropped on one knee and saluted her. The chiefess burst into tears, jumped to her feet and led Liholiho across the circle to his mother. Stewart described the meeting of the two. "He knelt before her, gazing silently in her face for a moment, then pressed her to his bosom, and placing a hand on each cheek, kissed her twice in a most tender manner. . . . I scarce ever witnessed an exhibition of natural affection where the feelings were apparently more lively and sincere. The king is a fine-looking man, and graceful in his manners; while gazing on him, the queen's heart seemed to float in her eyes, and every feature *told a mother's joy*."<sup>56</sup>

The next morning Stewart and Richards went as usual to the queen's residence for the sunrise prayer service. The evidence of Liholiho's presence was everywhere—empty liquor cases stacked on a mat near Keopuolani's door; on the ground men and women deep in drunken sleep. The shocked Americans went back to the mission house. Returning later they found that the revelry had resumed. At sunset they tried for a third time to find their royal congregation. But Liholiho's celebration was at its height; drums and singing throbbed through the air. Taua was waiting for the missionaries. He informed them that Keopuolani had gone to the residence of Nahienaena and expected them there. The queen was resting on a couch surrounded by the usual group of worshippers. When she saw the missionaries, tears sprang to her eyes. She lifted her hand and pointed toward her home in the *kou* grove. Then, in a voice strained with feeling, she muttered, "Shameful, oh shameful!" She sobbed for some time, hiding her face in a roll of kapa. When she had recovered, Taua read evening prayers. He called upon God to send his grace to Keopuolani and begged Him to lead king Liholiho to reformation and redemption.

Stewart learned later that Keopuolani during the night had pleaded with her son and warned that the debauchery would lead him to "everlasting fire."<sup>57</sup>

Stewart recorded a conversation between Keopuolani and Liholiho which might well have taken place on that night—with the drums beating their accompaniment. The king accused his mother of studying too much. It was not good for her. "You are old and it is well for you to study only a little." Keopuolani said that she was old and would die. "Therefore I must learn soon, or I shall die before I obtain the good thing I desire." Liholiho was particularly exasperated by the missionaries. They did not allow his mother to drink rum with him or "to do anything we formerly did. Their teachings are false and evil, their prayers are not good. Let us return to our former custom; let us now, as we formerly did, drink a little rum together." Keopuolani reminded her son he had once said the missionaries were good; he had instructed her to listen to them and give up the old religion. Now it was he who no longer listened. "Are not the missionaries the same, and their instruction the same?" Keopuolani asked. She added: "I will never forsake my teachers. I will never take my dark heart again."<sup>58</sup>

## 6

In early September, 1823, Keopuolani became seriously ill. She was afflicted with "spasms" and "attacks" which filled her family and the chiefs with great alarm. On September 9, the king's physician said that she would not recover. The king, her husband, the prince and princess remained almost constantly at her side. They bent close to listen to the faint tones of her voice as she spoke her last charges to them and as she reiterated her faith in the Christian God.

Her mind dwelt on three things during these few remaining days. She wanted above all to be baptized—"to have water sprinkled on me in the name of God before I die."<sup>59</sup> Stewart and Richards hesitated. They were convinced of her devotion to Christian faith. But they knew only a few words of Hawaiian and felt it necessary to communicate with the queen during the ministration of the rite. Her second concern was the welfare and development of her children. She charged both Hoapili and Kalanimoku, the prime minister, with their care. To her husband she said, "See that you take good care of Nahienaena. See that she is instructed in reading and writing, that she may learn to love God and Jesus Christ." She told the prime minister that she wanted her children to know God and serve Him. "See that they walk in the right way. . . Let them not associate with bad companions."

Her final request was to her elder son, the king. She admonished him to be a friend to the friends of his father, to her friends and to the missionaries. And she added, "Take care of these lands which you have received from your father. Exercise a tender care over the people."<sup>60</sup>

She had made her last charges. But she remained unbaptized. The chiefs decided to summon William Ellis from Honolulu. He knew both Tahitian and Hawaiian. Before he arrived, Keopuolani had fallen into a coma. Ellis conferred with Stewart and Richards, and the missionaries made their decision. In the presence of the royal family and the chiefs, the Reverend Mr. Ellis delivered a short address to explain the meaning of baptism; he sprinkled Keopuolani with water in the name of God. She had earlier chosen Harriet, the name of Mrs. Stewart, to be her baptismal name. Queen Keopuolani thus became the "first fruit of the mission." The ceremony was performed at five in the afternoon of September 16, 1823. At six o'clock the queen was dead.<sup>61</sup>

Her funeral services mingled traditional Hawaiian and western ways. Chiefs and commoners wailed, but no violence was committed in accordance with Keopuolani's firm command. When Kuakini, governor of the island of Hawaii and a distinguished elder statesman, arrived for the funeral, the mourners came from Keopuolani's house to greet him. Five thousand people had gathered at the spot, and the burst of wailing was so intense that not even the minute guns of the ships in Lahaina Roads could be heard. An old print in the Richards' Memoir of Keopuolani portrays the scene. In the background are three grass houses, stark and barn-like. Before Keopuolani's house the Hawaiian flag flies at half mast. In front of the houses multitudes of people wail. The prominent figures of the foreground are Governor Kuakini, dressed in foreign clothes and leaning on a cane, Hoapili and Kamamalu, Liholiho's favorite wife, dressed in Hawaiian fashion, and the young prince and princess. The children are seated on the shoulders of attendants and are dressed in foreign style. Kauikeaouli has his hands and head thrown upward and his mouth open for wailing. Nahienaena holds the forehead of her attendant, but her head is thrust back and her mouth open. Even in the stiff, somewhat naive drawing of the print, the scene suggests desolation and grief.

The mission chapel was too small for the funeral. The burial of a queen and sacred chiefess had to be carried out with dignity and pomp to give opportunity for thousands to mourn. The missionaries chose for the services the *kou* grove in which the sunrise and sunset prayer had been held. Afterwards, a procession was formed to carry Keopuolani to her tomb; some four or five hundred people marched, headed by the American consul. He was followed by prominent foreigners, missionaries, servants

and attendants of the queen mother. Then came the body of Keopuolani covered with a rich pall; it was attended by the five queens of Liholiho and the daughter of Hoapili, each carrying a black *kahili*. Again a print in Richards' Memoir gives us a picture. Immediately behind the body of the queen, in the place of honor, march the prince and princess. They look small, almost lost, in the somber black procession. And they walk. They are not carried, as was customary, on the shoulders of an attendant. Behind them came the king and Hoapili, followed by the rest of the chiefs in order of rank. Keopuolani's body was carried to the house of stone recently erected for the princess—it would later be used as a mausoleum for the royal family. Throughout the afternoon bells tolled and the minute guns resounded.<sup>62</sup>

Keopuolani was buried with the Christian ceremony she had ardently desired. The ancient tradition lingered, however, in the *kahilis* which fluttered at her bier, in the wailing; and the chiefs encamped around her tomb for several weeks to honor her. It also persisted in the sacred blood with which she had endowed her children and in the continuing remembrance of her divinity. Tough-minded, determined, regal, she could act swiftly in the old manner when it was necessary, and she could select what she considered good from western culture. In the last years of her life, she blended in her fashion the old and the new. Though she remains mysterious because we have only fragments of her history, she emerges from these fragments a figure of power and wisdom.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Samuel M. Kamakau, *Ka Po'e Kahiko*, Mary Kawena Pukui, trans. (Honolulu, 1964), 4-5.
- <sup>2</sup> William Richards, *Memoir of Keopuolani, Late Queen of the Sandwich Islands* (Boston, 1825), 2.
- <sup>3</sup> Abraham M. Fornander, *An Account of the Polynesian Race, Its Origin and Migrations* (Vermont, 1969), I, 184.
- <sup>4</sup> Samuel M. Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs of Hawaii* (Honolulu, 1961), 259.
- <sup>5</sup> Fornander, II, 228.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.
- <sup>7</sup> Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 148-149; Fornander, II, 236-239.
- <sup>8</sup> Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 259-260.
- <sup>9</sup> Fornander, II, 238.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 238; Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 149.

- 11 Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, n. 220.
- 12 Fornander, II, 212.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 238; Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 149.
- 14 Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 149.
- 15 Fornander, II, 238.
- 16 Kamakau, *Ka Po'e*, 85.
- 17 Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 260.
- 18 Richards, *Memoir*, n. 17; Fornander, II, 338.
- 19 Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 208.
- 20 Richards, *Memoir*, 14; Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 261.
- 21 Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 259.
- 22 John Papa Ii, *Fragments of Hawaiian History* (Honolulu, 1963), 33-37.
- 23 Richards, *Memoir*, 14-15; Hiram Bingham, *Residence of Twenty-one Years in the Sandwich Islands* (New York, 1848), 183.
- 24 Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 220-221.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 260; 263-264.
- 26 Sheldon Dibble, *History of the Sandwich Islands* (Lahainaluna, 1843), 145.
- 27 W. D. Alexander, *A Brief History of the Hawaiian People* (New York, 1891), 166.
- 28 Alexander, *A Brief History*, 167; Dibble, *History*, 146.
- 29 Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 212-215.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 224.
- 31 *Ibid.* 220; Dibble, *History*, 148; Alexander, *A Brief History*, 167.
- 32 Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 224.
- 33 Dibble, *History*, 148; Alexander, *A Brief History*, 167; Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 224.
- 34 Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 224; Dibble, *History*, 148.
- 35 Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 224-225; Dibble, *History*, 149-151; Alexander, *A Brief History*, 169.
- 36 Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 226-228; Dibble, *History*, 154-157.
- 37 Bingham, *Residence*, 86.
- 38 Richards, *Memoir*, 18.
- 39 Kamakau, *Ruling Chiefs*, 252.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 252-253; Bingham, *Residence*, 40; Ralph S. Kuykendall, *The Hawaiian Kingdom 1778-1854* (Honolulu, 1938), 74-75.
- 41 Bingham, *Residence*, 170.
- 42 Richards, *Memoir*, 18.
- 43 Bingham, *Residence*, 159.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 183.
- 45 Richards, *Memoir*, 18.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 18-19.
- 47 Charles S. Stewart, *A Residence in the Sandwich Islands* (Boston, 1839), 77-78.
- 48 Richards, *Memoir*, 21.



- <sup>49</sup> Stewart, *Residence*, 132-136.  
<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-137.  
<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-138.  
<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.  
<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 143-144.  
<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.  
<sup>55</sup> William Ellis, *Polynesian Researches, Hawaii* (Vermont, 1969), 78-79.  
<sup>56</sup> Stewart, *Residence*, 148.  
<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.  
<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*  
<sup>59</sup> Richards, *Memoir*, 32.  
<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-34.  
<sup>61</sup> Stewart, *Residence*, 165-167.  
<sup>62</sup> Richards, *Memoir*, 40-41; Stewart, *Residence*, 172-173.